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ABSTRACT

The effects of a statewide testing policy on school district organizational structure are described in this report. A year-long ethnographic case study identified the following dysfunctional results of school reform based on external regulation: ambivalent local educator attitudes; the promotion of a professional teaching dilemma; negative influences on curriculum and instruction; and the vulnerability of the professional culture. A conclusion is that teacher-student interaction cannot be mandated by external regulation and manipulation of the local organizational structure. A recommendation is made for the development of teachers' professional capacity over compliance with state testing standards. (34 references) (LMI)

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State Testing Policy and Organizational Change: Transformation Through Testing?

Symposium: School Reform and Organization Change:

Lessons from Theory and Practice

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State Testing Policy and Organizational Change:
Transformation Through Testing?

This paper considers one common feature of school reform efforts, state mandated testing, as an example of a planned, rather than a transformational, approach to organizational change. Lawmakers, believing that state policy can be a stimulus for organizational change, have focused school improvement efforts on the surface level technology of the organization. By requiring school districts to give particular tests and to report the scores of these tests for each school and district, Ohio policy makers believe they can change schools and thereby improve the education offered to students.

Policy makers try to alter surface level technology of education by legislating what teachers teach, namely, the content of the state mandated test. By focusing teacher attention on the content and skills assessed in the required tests, state policymakers believe that education will improve.

For the state testing policy to succeed as a mechanism for change, policy makers rely on some additional features of the schooling organization. First, they depend on the need for public schools to be accountable for the use of public funds, and they define accountability in terms of test scores. That is, for educators to prove they are using public money wisely, their students must score at a certain level on state mandated tests. Furthermore, policy makers rely on competition as a natural part of the structure of public education, and expect parents and community members to use test scores as the basis for comparing the quality of different

schools. In addition, lawmakers rely on a the presence of a top-down hierarchy in the school organization, which, when coupled with fear of embarrassment over low scores, will compel administrators to compel teachers to compel students to improve.

With its focus on changing the technology of schools and its reliance on a top-down hierarchial structure driven by competition, state testing legislation never addresses the underlying assumptions which shape the culture of schools. This paper describes what happens when such a state testing mandate confronts the particular organizational culture of a single school district. In short, the top-down legislated learning approach of the state testing policy collides with the bottom-up, development of teacher capacity and professionalism approach of the school district. The findings from an ethnographic case study of the effect of the state testing policy on the work and relationships of educators in one school district are reported. Prior to a discussion of its findings, this study is situated within the context of previous research on the implementation of educational policies.

Policy Implementation Literature

The literature on educational policy includes studies of the uses of different policy tools in different organizational contexts (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Clune, 1986), and there are extensive studies of the process of implementing federal policy at local levels (Bardach, 1977; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Elmore, 1977; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1982; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). In

addition, there are an increasing number of studies of state educational policies, focused especially on the current educational reform movement (Chance, 1988; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988; Mitchell & Encarnation, 1984; Murphy, 1980; Orlich, 1985; 1989; Timar & Kirp, 1988; 1989).

Fewer studies, however, have focused on the implementation of state level policies within the specific organizational context of particular school districts and from the perspectives of individual school administrators. It is within such a specification of context and perspective that a new generation of implementation policy analysis is being called for. McLaughlin (1987) invites a new form of policy analysis which will integrate the macro world of policymakers with the micro world of individual implementors: "The problem for analysts comprises linking the nominalistic world of the street level bureaucrat to the systemic patterns that comprise the world of policymakers" (p. 177).

By focusing on the situations where macro forces meet micro realities educational research can shed light on the organizational and individual aspects of policy implementation. Situating implementation studies in their particular organizational context is seen as critical to assessing their impact (McLaughlin, 1987; Miller & Lieberman, 1988; Wimpelberg, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 1989). Timar & Kirp (1989) emphasize that a new theory of institutional reform would focus on improving the health and competence of the schools <u>as organizations</u>. This emphasis on the importance of the particular organizational culture of a school in order to understand the implementation of a policy or program is echoed by Goodlad (1988-89):

> Because policy makers and many school reformers appear to lack understanding of the school as a culture, they continue to recommend a relatively narrow array of interventions having little or nothing to do with improving the health of the school ecosystem. They continue to assume that schools are like factories. More input in the form of courses, rules and regulations, hours, or even materials will result in greater output. If the output is not judged sufficient, more of the same will do the trick....I am convinced that we will continue to make only peripheral and cosmetic changes in schools until we approach understanding and improving them from a quite different perspective. This perspective begins with viewing the school, not as as factory, but as a culture or ecosystem which will function effectively only if each the the components is healthy and the relationships among these components likewise is healthy (p. 5).

Within the understanding of schools as cultures, there is a caution not to turn them into reified, concrete entities apart from the people of whom they are composed and who give them meaning (Blumer, 1969; Foster, 1989; Greenfield, 1980; 1983; Theodossin, 1982). Instead, an examination of the "subjective constructions whereby meanings are realized in institutional form" (Foster, 1989, p. 112) is what is needed in the study of educational administration. Using the interpretivist approach, Foster claims that a useful direction for research is "to probe how administrators make sense of their environment, how they attach significance to particular events, and the ways through which interpretation of reality take place" (1989, p. 112).

In keeping with the call for a new generation of policy analysis, this study examined how the state testing policy was interpreted by educators, especially administrators, situated in the particular organizational context of their schools and district.

Macro State Testing Policy Meets Micro School District Culture:

The state testing policy of interest requires each public school district to assess and report the achievement and ability of its fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth graders, and requires that high school students pass a state developed ninth grade proficiency test before being awarded a diploma of basic competence. In addition, to receive a diploma with distinction or commendation, the students must pass a statewide twelfth grade proficiency test. By requiring districts to report the achievement/ability scores of students in each school both to the state and to their local communities and by potentially preventing students who have successfully completed their high school curriculum from receiving a diploma if they do not pass the state proficiency test, the authors of the legislation intended to impact the curriculum and instruction of schools, thereby improving the outcome for students.

The school district of interest has undergone a dramatic transformation in size and character in the last decade. In a short time it has emerged from a small farming community to a rapidly growing, relatively affluent city. The number of schools has increased four times in the last ten years, and with this expansion, the district has been able to hire what it considers to be the best teachers and administrators from several thousand applicants. Some district residents, however, are expressing concern over the increase in taxes accompanying this rapid growth, and the school district has been criticized for what some consider to be fancier-than-necessary new buildings and programs.

When attention is focused on the interactions of educators in the district, it is evident that there has been a concerted effort among central office and building administrators to acknowledge and build upon the strengths of the carefully selected teachers. A culture of professionalism, in which teachers are expected to make curricular and instructional decisions both within their classrooms and across the district, has been established and maintained. During the study, administrators and teachers talked freely of the expertise of their colleagues, of the respect they have for one another, and of the support that is provided to try out new ideas and to actively practice instructional approaches suggested by current research. In general, the culture within each school is characterized by teachers and administrators engaged in an ongoing dialogue about their work and its improvement. Although not without interpersonal conflict and differences of opinion, the overall context for teachers within these schools is one of respect for their professional expertise and support and challenge for ongoing improvement.

When the focus shifts from the context among educators within schools to the context of the district as a whole, however, the culture is characterized by less cooperation and more conflict. In marked contrast to the spirit of respect and cooperation evidenced within the schools and across schools in teacher/administrator meetings, the school board meetings have included open strife among members and between board members and some community members. Decisions over school attendance boundaries, which students would walk rather than be provided bus transportation, cuts in staff positions, and which field trips were allowed in face of budget

shortfalls were made in the midst of controversy, accusations, and, for some board members, threats.

In between these two contexts of a professional culture within schools and open strife among board and community members sit the central office and building administrators. The context for their work is a mixture of support and tension. Although individual administrators have developed professional and personal relationships which enable them to support each other, there is not a collective context which envelops them all. Principals have developed individual havens in which teachers can enact their professional roles within each building, yet they do not have a similar professional haven for themselves. Understandably the principal is in a position to feel the press of criticism and strife from the community and school board. Yet some principals appear to feel alone in this tension, and not a part of a larger context of support from their colleagues across the district.

The state testing policy becomes a part of these various layers of the district's organization through the interpretations given it by the local actors. Whether this policy changes the organization as the legislators intend depends on how the administrators and teachers make sense of it and act on it. What happens when educators, who are focusing on developing a culture of teacher professionalism as the means for improving schools, are confronted with a mandate which focuses change efforts on the organizations' surface level technology, namely the content of instruction? How do educators who have developed a pattern of professional decision-making react to a state policy which defines local accountability according to their

students' scores on a state-selected test and which, by virtue of the test, defines what their curricular and instructional emphasis should be? How do they deal with the pressures, generated by the state policy, to teach to the test and to engage in comparisons among schools?

Methods and Findings

During this year-long ethnographic case study I watched the collision of the state mandate and the professional culture of the district. The data collection occasions included shadowing the assistant superintendent responsible for implementing the state testing policy in the district, observing 26 district meetings in which the state testing policy was either directly or indirectly on the agenda, and interiewing 27 central office administrators, building principals, assistant principals, and teachers about the policy.

The remainder of this paper highlights four aspects of the findings from the study: 1) local educators' view of the state testing policy; 2) the professional dilemma created for them by the policy; 3) teachers teaching to the test while saying they do not; and 4) the vulnerability of the professional culture to the state testing policy in the absence of a district-wide alternative accountability measure.

Educators' View of the Policy

The educators in this district expressed ambivalent feelings about the achievement/ability and proficiency provisions of the state testing policy. While recognizing that the state had a right to be concerned if students were not receiving an education, and that taxpayers had a right to hold educators accountable for public trust and public funds, they felt that neither test accurately or appropriately assessed their district's written curriculum and instructional practices. For example, the achievement test measured isolated skills, presented in a work-book oriented, multiple choice format. Their instruction, on the other hand, focused on application of integrated and complex skills, emphasizing such instructional approaches as whole language, writing process, and interdisciplinary units. In their minds, the achievement test reflects an archaic way of thinking about education, which ignores research findings of the last 25 years regarding how children learn.

The proficiency test focuses instruction in the four areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and citizenship on a set of "learning outcomes" promulgated by the State Department of Education. These educators judge some of the learning outcomes to be developmentally inappropriate for students in the grades that will be tested. Other learning outcomes are taught either much earlier or much later in the local curriculum, and still others demand a memorization of particular facts that are not currently emphasized in the local curriculum. The question for these educators becomes if and how much to adjust their written curriculum and their instructional offerings to align them with the state proficiency test. In effect, they see

the learning outcomes of the state proficiency test as establishing a statewide curriculum, ignoring the local effort to develop a curriculum which responds to the the needs of local students and their own vision of what education should be.

Furthermore, the educators in this district are concerned with how the results from the achievement tests will be used. Although they believe that the tests do not match their content or instructional approaches, they fear that the results will be used to unfairly compare districts, schools, and teachers. Given that the tests can only measure a very narrow aspect of what education is about, and that students come to school with different strengths and different needs, they feel that judging the quality of the schools or the teachers by using test results is misguided and unfair.

In addition, the comparisons engendered by such judgements will increase the competition among educators. In contrast to state policy makers, educators see competition, not as a spur to improve schooling, but as dysfunctional to the central purpose of educating all students. Collaboration and cooperation among educators, rather than competition, are seen as the necessary qualities for improving schools. In keeping with a culture of professionalism in which all members contribute their different talents for the benefit of all students, educators see no improvement coming from a policy which pits one school or one teacher against another.

Another concern of the teachers and administrators in this district is the resources funneled into meeting the state testing requirement. These tests consume considerable district funds as well as the time, energy and attention of administrators, teachers, and

support staff to prepare for, administer, and analyze the results. The financial and human resources expended on these tests, which are of questionable instructional value, are therefore not available for the development of assessments which do match the local curriculum and which could be useful accountability measures. At this point in time, the educators in this district need to be able to articulate their educational vision and practices and to demonstrate their success at educating pupils to the local community. Having the state testing mandate absorb their energy while judging and comparing them with inappropriate measures exacerbates their already difficult situation.

Professional Dilemma

Throughout the observations of and interviews with district educators, there was one refrain which captures the dilemma created for them by the state testing policy. It can be summarized as follows:

> State testing could make educators lose sight of their central purpose: doing what is best for students. If educators have to base their daily decisions on what makes them look good to those above them in the schooling hierarchy, instead of on what their professional judgement tells them is best for students, everyone loses. Even the very best teachers and administrators cannot resist forever the pressure that comes from comparing test scores.

This dilemma over doing what they believe is best for students versus doing what will make them "look good" in the schooling hierarchy is particularly felt by administrators who are obliged to enforce a policy with which they disagree, at least in part. How do administrators justify the testing to teachers when they cannot

justify it to themselves? The presumption in the state mandate that administrators will be told to give the test and they in turn will tell teachers to give the test and it will be done without question represents a military, rather than a professional, organizational structure. The state mandate thus puts administrators in the position of ignoring their own professional judgement as well as that of teachers.

It also asks them to ignore the possible negative effects the policy may have on the local curriculum, a curriculum developed by local teachers to respond to the needs of their students and which reflects their professional judgement regarding what should be taught, when, and how. The following quote illustrates the personal struggle of one building administrator as he/she tries to justify the policy and considers its effect on both the local curriculum and the professional relations within the school:

> I don't think [our district] needs to be accountable to the State Department of Education as far as what [our kids know]. We need to be accountable to the community and the people that live [here], basically.
>
> ...They [the teachers] are really not negative about it [the proficiency test]. You know, they're just saying that, 'I'd rather be doing what I'm supposed to be doing.'...Because they know that [the principals] are looking at them and making sure that they are covering the graded course of study, and now we have to do this other thing.
>
> ...And I think it's hard for them to justify it, to be quite frank with you, I really do. I really think that they're struggling with that. It's hard for me to justify doing this. I'll do it because you tell me to do it, but professionally it's hard for me to justify it.... I think, too, if we could show them [teachers] what benefit this is going to have to my class and my students — if we could show them that, if we had something to show them, then ...they would have no problem with it. I guess as an administrator I'm kind of struggling with that fact. What benefit is this all going to give us? I'm not so sure I

> know. But I think the whole idea behind this, from the state department...was accountability, which, again, we need to have. But I'm not so sure the benefits are going to be what we want, or even what we need.
>
> ...And the change process is a slow process, and you just can't force things upon people. You have to — it's a part of leadership. They have to accept it eventually, and, you know, and want to do it. And I think, again, this goes back to the state testing, too, you can relate it to that. You can't — you can't force things on people. You can't force things on professional, educated people. You just can't do it. It has to evolve over time, and they have to accept the change and want to do it. I don't think we're there... I really don't.

The concern that the state testing policy will alter the professional relations established between administrators and teachers in the district is echoed by the assistant superintendent. Rather than serving in a support role for teacher professionalism, the policy makes him, in his words, "an agent of the state":

> ...I am very uncomfortable serving this role to the district, I don't enjoy it one bit. It forces the faculty, including administrators, to see me as an agent of the state.
>
> ...It does affect, and I think in many cases, pollute [my] relationship with faculty. And I don't enjoy it at all."

Another administrator expresses the professional quandary in terms of the impact of the policy on students and their parents:

> I was a part of the committee that went around looking at what other districts are doing [about state testing] and I just walked away thinking, - my big question is 'Why'?. Why all of that? What is it doing for the kids?
> ...I see that it really does nothing for the kids but make them anxious and make the parents anxious. And many times it doesn't even give us complete information, better information than we have on them from teachers daily notations in their grade books and notations on observation cards and things like that.

> ...I think in this whole policy that kids were left out of it. In other words, we have to suffer with it.

A final aspect of the professional dilemma created by the policy is the concern over how their teaching will change in order for educators to appear successful to those outside of the school. If others judge them on the basis of the test results, this principal feels teachers have no choice but to teach to the test:

> Principal: If we start to drive the curriculum in order to do well on the test, then I see us doing more of the things that we've moved away from...the workbook kind of things, the isolated skills, the skills ... we don't feel are grade or age appropriate.
>
> ...I don't want us to start to allow the tail to wag the dog, in that the test dictates what our teachers are doing. And we can tell people till we're blue in the face that that [test] is meaningless, that we're doing something else, but even our own teachers if they see their scores come back [low]...
>
> Researcher: The notion that the test could drive the curriculum, even among the best teachers..?
>
> Principal: Absolutely...it's going to, it's not a matter of 'if'; it will. If I were a very good classroom teacher and I knew that at the end of second grade my students were going to get a test on grammar and that that test included semicolons, even if I felt semicolons were inappropriate second grade material, I'd cover it.
>
> Because I wouldn't want the students to look bad or me to look bad. And I think that's what's going to happen.

The concern over what counts as success is exacerbated with the state's intent to compare schools and school districts on the basis of these test scores. As put by another principal:

> If these statewide or regional comparisons are made, we are going to start teaching to the test, which is going to take us off our home base of teaching what is best for kids.

Teaching to the Test

Despite these strong predictions from school principals, most district educators did not foresee a change in the local curriculum due to the test results. That is, those interviewed prior to the point in the study when the actual achievement test scores were distributed declared they would not teach to the test. Instead they suggested that if students were to score poorly on particular test items which matched their local curriculum, this outcome would cause teachers to look at their instruction. If, on the other hand, students scored poorly on items that were not well matched with their local curriculum, they predicted that teachers would not change the curriculum or their instructional practices as a result of the test scores. Given their strong belief in the value of the local curriculum, teachers and most principals did not anticipate changing it due to achievement test results. That is, they did not foresee themselves teaching to the test, especially since these multiple choice tests do not reveal the student's thinking process, and do not provide accurate information about individual students from which teachers can base instruction.

After the test results were returned and the students in one of the schools performed poorly on one subtest, there was considerable consternation from parents about the results. The principal spent several days looking over an additional item analysis (provided at some time, energy and material expense by the central office) in order to uncover which items caused the problem. It was discovered that the content of 13 of the 50 items on that particular subtest had not yet been taught by teachers who were following the timing

sequence in the local written curriculum. It was therefore legitimate for students to not know how to approach these specific test items. It was interesting to note, however, that students in other buildings throughout the district did well on these same items.

The interpretation given this peculiar outcome from veteran administrators in the district was that teachers familiar with the test content from previous years do in fact insure that students have instruction on that particular content prior to the state testing, even if the instruction would normally come after the testing dates if teachers were to strictly follow the sequence of the local curriculum. In this one building, however, there were many new teachers who had not given this same test in the past, and the "informal" knowledge about the content of the test was not available to them. Teachers in this particular building played it straight, teaching the local curriculum in the sequence they thought it was supposed to be taught.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this episode is that this form of testing does affect what gets taught in the classroom, whether or not the content is included prior to the testing or at all in the local curriculum. Teachers who know what is on the test from past experience insure that its content and the format in which the content is presented is taught in their classrooms. Whether this is an unconscious choice, or a conscious but unspoken choice, the overall consequence is that the test does influence the "lived" curriculum in the classroom. This is a subtle, covert influence, however, one that does not come to the surface unless something goes "wrong".

Argyris & Schon (1978) refer to this distinction as the difference between espoused theory and theory-in-use. The espoused theory of these educators was that they believed in the local curriculum and used it, not the content and skills of the state mandated test, to guide their instructional practices. Their theory-in-use, however, takes into account the high political stakes associated with state testing, and insures that their students have received instruction on the content included in the test prior to the test administration. Since they as teachers, as well as their students, their school, and their district could "look bad" if the scores are low, the curriculum and instruction are altered to insure that students have every chance to score highly on the test.

Vulnerability of the Professional Culture

The impact of the state testing policy on the educators in this school district is aggravated by the particular nature of its organizational culture. Given that this district is made up of havens of professional support within schools but not across schools, the state testing policy spotlights a vulnerable aspect of the organization: the lack of a district-wide consensus on how they should be held accountable. In other words, the impact of the state testing policy may be more keenly felt in this district because it touches on the weak link across schools. It threatens the professional culture because it asks the question of accountability about the aggregate, that is, about the students and schools as a whole.

The state testing policy does not ask the question of accountability close to the daily instruction of individual students in classrooms. If it did, teachers could articulate how they are accountable in terms of their assessment of individual students. Teachers could converse with parents or others about what a particular student is learning in great detail because they could use all of the assessment tools available at the classroom level (including classroom tests, the child's papers, observations of child's verbal expressions, non-written work, etc.)

But the test results called for in the state testing policy ask the question of accountability about the aggregate. The indicator of success is removed from assessments of individuals and focused on assessment of the collective. Given that the indicators of success required by the state testing policy (achievement and proficiency test scores) do not match the instruction these educators have offered, and that these indicators assume a form of schooling which is in opposition to their professional vision of how to educate children, local educators are currently left without accountability measures which both they and the local community recognize as legitimate indicators of the quality of their schools.

To make matters worse, the state testing policy insists on comparing schools with one another based on the test results. The ensuing competition pits the well-being of one school against the other and reinforces the tendency to identify with and protect one's own building.

Since there is not a collective haven among the principals, central office administrators, and board members, they have not held the conversations needed to articulate a more appropriate measure of success for their schools. Without the establishment of trusting relationships, it may be difficult for these educators to have the conversations needed to construct a collectively defined alternative to the state testing policy. As a result, the state testing policy can add to the discontent and strife characterizing the relationships among the school board, administrators, and community, and thereby undermine the professional culture educators have tried to create within their organization.

Conclusion

This case study provides an illustration of the dysfunctional aspects of trying to change schools through external regulation and manipulation of the technology of the organization. As Elmore, (1983, 1987), McNeil (1988), and Wise (1979) attest, legislating what learning should be does not insure that schools will improve. The important aspects of any human service program (of which education is one example) is that "they depend heavily on the quality of the interaction between service giver and client" (Elmore, 1983, p. 356). Given that the interactions between teachers and students are the most important aspect of schooling, the state legislators cannot mandate what truly matters. They cannot force these interactions to be of high quality. When they try, they may make the situation worse. By attempting to control the content and form of instruction, via state testing for example, they can reduce teacher-student

interactions to mechanical exchanges focused on the "lists" which have come to represent the content of instruction (McNeil, 1988). That is, the content is fragmented and reduced to lists of facts to facilitate ease of presentation via teacher lectures, ease of memorization by students, and ease of assessment via multiple choice tests. The consequence is that the curriculum is dull, the classroom affect is flat, and neither teachers nor students are intellectually engaged in the educational process (Goodlad, 1983, McNeil, 1988).

The alternative approach to transforming the organization of the school is to recognize that teachers make the most important discretionary choices in education and to maximize their control over the instructional process. The way to improve instruction is to put teachers in touch with each other, rather than to have administrators tell them what to do (Elmore, 1983). This alternative relies on the development of teachers' professional capacity, rather than on compliance with external regulation, as the means to transform schooling. It depends on the establishment and maintenance of a professional culture within schools, where teachers accept and relish the responsibility for making curricular and instructional decisions.

Although it cannot transform schools, a state testing policy, as illustrated by this study, has the potential to threaten the professional culture of a school district. By requiring that educators be judged with inappropriate accountability measures, the state testing policy can shake their vision of what education should be and their confidence in their professional judgement, thereby undermining their capacity to respond to the needs of their students.

Although they may change their curriculum and instruction to comply with the state testing regulation, the outcome will not be a transformation of the schooling process or an improved education for students.

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